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Leading the Particular Church into Its Future

Once a mission work is organized as a new and separate congregation of the OPC, it becomes, in Form of Government terms, a particular church. As such, it enjoys all the rights and responsibilities of every church in its denomination. However, the goal of planting a Presbyterian and Reformed church is not its organization, but its permanent ministry and the contributions it makes throughout its lifetime to the work of the kingdom of God. Those contributions involve a number of roles and relationships, one of which is an increasing involvement in the life of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church as a denomination.

BEING PART OF YOUR DENOMINATION

Within the evangelical world today, denominationalism and denominational loyalty have become unfashionable. But a Reformed church has little difficulty understanding the pervasiveness of sin even in matters of ecclesiology. Put negatively, a church denomination is an accommodation to a sinful world, which touches every aspect and organization of life, including the Church of Jesus Christ. No amount of wishing it were otherwise or glossing over glaring differences in theology and practice among believers will bring about a true organizational unity. But those who come from a Presbyterian and Reformed perspective are unwilling to forsake the structure, order, and unity of the church in favor of unofficial gatherings of Christians who share particular interests and goals. Put positively, being part of a denomination like the Orthodox Presbyterian Church allows believers to continue to sense the unity of the Church and provides them with opportunities to implement Biblical practices to the greatest extent possible. Because of its commitment to the Westminster Confession of Faith and its Larger and Shorter Catechisms, members of the

Orthodox Presbyterian Church are able to share true unity of faith, which reaches beyond the limits of their local church and provides a platform from which they may dialogue with believers of other denominational groups, wherever they are in the world. And because of its emphasis on connectionalism, believers who are part of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church may become intimately acquainted with fellow Christians and their needs in congregations in other geographical regions far from their own homes, in much the same way as New Testament believers were able to share their concerns for Euodia, Syntyche, Tychicus, Onesimus, and Epaphras (Philippians 4:2–3; Colossians 4:7–12). Rather than being apologetic or embarrassed about denominational commitment and loyalty, Orthodox Presbyterians have reason to celebrate being part of the heritage and ongoing ministry of their church denomination.

Participate in its ministries

Before He ascended into Heaven, Jesus gave us His great commission to go into all the world and make disciples by baptizing and teaching both Jews and Gentiles alike to observe all that He has commanded (Matthew 28:18–20). Therefore, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church offers means and methods for implementing our Lord's directions, not just on a local level, but nationally and globally as well.

Through its Committee on Christian Education, training and discipleship materials are made available, hymnbooks and worship materials are printed and distributed, ruling elders and deacons are trained, and men are equipped and provided with internships as they take up God's call to be pastors and evangelists. Through its Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension, new churches are established throughout North America and, on an ever-increasing basis, Christ's sheep are brought in proximity to shepherds. And through its Committee on Foreign Missions, the gospel is preached authoritatively in distant places, and new churches of His people are begun and strengthened in various parts of the world into which He has told us to go. But this is just the outline of the work. Every congregation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church is invited and urged to shoulder this ministry of Worldwide Outreach by praying for it, supporting it financially, and being open to God's call for some of its people to go. Current information about these ministries can be obtained in the pages of the OPC's denominational magazine, *New Horizons in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*. Congregations throughout the OPC have adopted these ministries as their own.

Celebrate unity within its diversity

The Church of the Old Testament, as well as the Church of the New Testament, were diverse in their composition. The stranger and the alien were always as much a part of Old Testament Church life as the pure-blooded children of Reuben or Zebulun. In the New Testament Church, the Jew and the Greek worshiped together and confessed that the barbarian and the Scythian could also be of the household of faith, because they shared one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father who is above all and through all and in all (Colossians 3:11; Ephesians 4:5–6). Its confessional commitment allows the Orthodox Presbyterian Church to maintain true unity of belief and purpose, though methods and emphases may differ widely. Rather than seeing such differences as dangerous or divisive, those who understand the nature and purpose of the church know that there is reason for celebrating such diversity within unity in Christ. The church must constantly examine her beliefs and commitments, and healthy, celebrative dialogue is a sign of life and vitality. It is something that every congregation of the OPC can enjoy and appreciate.

Respect its culture

Every denominational grouping of churches has its ways of doing things and reasons for its preferences and concerns. Such matters may be identified as a denominational culture. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church has a rich heritage of commitment to a Reformed expression of Christianity and to a doctrinal emphasis in its preaching and teaching ministry. It holds ruling elders in high regard, and it also values the distinct office of the minister. And it loves to sing psalms, as well as hymns and spiritual songs. These are part of a denominational culture that no local congregation is asked to formally adopt, but which each particular church can and should appreciate and value highly.

BEING PART OF YOUR PRESBYTERY

The concept of the Regional Church is a unique construct within the Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. It is a logical extrapolation of Biblical church polity, which reasons that if the local church has its session and the whole church has its general assembly, then it is the Regional Church which has, and is governed by, its presbytery. This construct of the Regional Church is now in operation and being

perfected in a growing number of presbyteries of the OPC. Since students of Presbyterian polity agree that the middle court has always been the strength of the Presbyterian system of government, this concept of the Regional Church may possibly be the next step in the development of a more consistent and robust form of Presbyterianism as it has developed since reaching the shores of the New World in the early 1700s.

Value connectionalism

Presbyterianism operates on the basis of a Biblical understanding of the sinful nature of man. It recognizes the need for accountability and distrusts individual judgment. The flawed reasoning powers of the believers and their officers in a local church need the adjustment of interaction with outside ministers and elders. Without such accountability and submission to brothers, a new idea or the overemphasis of a certain doctrine or aspect of Bible teaching has the potential to tear the church apart. But through the concept and practice of connectionalism, the church is kept healthy and strong. Connectionalism is the positive side of accountability. It is most easily seen when ministers and elders from other churches of the presbytery visit to review the work of the congregation. But it should also be noticed with the enjoyable visits of friends and acquaintances from other churches who come to help or encourage or just to worship together on the Lord's Day with their fellow believers. Value such connectionalism. Welcome such visits and help from the presbytery. Offer hospitality and get to know the people and leaders of other churches.

Share your ministers and elders

The organizing pastor of a mission work is often encouraged by his presbytery to devote all his labors to the work of establishing the new church. Because fellow presbyters know that the work is difficult and time-consuming, they shoulder more of the ministry of the Regional Church and its presbytery themselves and allow the organizing pastor to immerse himself in the labor-intensive ministry of church planting. But as the mission work is organized as a new and separate congregation, it may be time to free the newly organized congregation's pastor and elders to shoulder greater responsibilities for the other churches of the presbytery. Do not be surprised if they are asked to help, and be encouraged when they are. Those who have just been involved in the establishment of a new church have gained much expertise that can be shared with others who are beginning the process themselves.

Be an active part of your Regional Church

Some Regional Churches are more active than others. Some hold joint worship services in a central location. Some have newsletters that tell of what is happening in each local congregation. Each Regional Church is involved in at least some intensive work of ministry to and for their young people, and most have family camp ministries and some form of cooperative outreach efforts. Get to know about the ministries of your Regional Church and plan to participate in them. And make it your goal to learn the name of each pastor and several of the people in each church of your presbytery.

THINK TO THE FUTURE

Just as the needs of families change as children are born and as the little ones grow older, so the needs of churches change over time. A congregation that is five years old must plan carefully for its future with respect to its facilities, ministries to specific age groups, and a host of other concerns. Often, the church planning analogy has been drawn from a business model, where goals are set and plans are laid for an ever-enlarging organization. But when the family analogy becomes the model for church planning practice, it becomes apparent that wise forecasting is necessary if plans are to be laid for a permanent home for the congregation's ministry, for the employment of a youth pastor, or for the establishment of a ministry to the homeless with the hiring of a full-time deacon.

Serve as a ministry center

Reformed churches, because of their commitment to Biblical authority and doctrinal preciseness, can excel as centers of ministry resources. Many Orthodox Presbyterian churches function in just this way with great effectiveness for the kingdom. They make a significant impact on their neighborhoods while serving the needs of the broader Christian community in their area. Consider some of these types of ministry center services as options for the future ministry of the newly organized congregation:

Training—A Bible institute could be organized, using the skills of local Reformed pastors to offer courses in theology and Biblical studies.

Instruction—Actual seminary classes could be organized and offered to those pursuing formal theological education by extension. Additionally, ministry center instruction could be designed for the ongoing training of

pastoral interns.

Christian education—A home schooling resource center could be offered, with a library and training materials made available, and specialized classes for older school-age children could be arranged.

Ministries of mercy—Providing ministry to the homeless, a clothing bank, a food pantry, a nursing home visitation ministry, or sponsoring a Christian counseling center or a crisis pregnancy center are examples of mercy ministries that could be offered.

Foreign missions—The world has become a smaller place, due to advances in travel and communication. Our shrinking planet has made it possible for churches to send their own families or young people not only to sample missionary labors in remote parts of the world, but also to be actively involved in a specific project or ministry which provides significant aid and assistance to a full-time career missionary.

Think about a church building

It usually takes about ten years for a church to grow to sufficient maturity and stability to possess sufficient resources in people and finances to be able to begin a building project. But many churches of that age look back with regret for failing to lay plans sooner for constructing or buying a church building.

Some good reasons for having a permanent location—The family analogy again comes into play when discussing good reasons for having a permanent location. While the family is not defined by its house and may move from place to place, every family needs the stability of a permanent residence. A church, in the same way, benefits greatly from a permanent location where members can gather and where ministry can take place. Congregations which, after many years, have finally obtained their own meeting facility marvel at how special a tool such a building proves to be as a base of ministry. The community around the church will also take notice of its greater permanence, and its facility can provide inroads into the homes of previously unchurched people to whom God reveals His Son as Savior and Lord.

Sources of help with building plans and programs—Through the Orthodox Presbyterian Church Loan Fund, the Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension provides counsel and advice concerning building plans and programs and provides loans to build or purchase worship and meeting structures. The Board of Directors of the OPC Loan Fund has adopted a policy that mission works and newly organized congregations are to re-

ceive the special attention of the ministry of the Loan Fund because of the importance of a permanent meeting location for the ministry of each particular church.

Be a mother to new churches

Of all the churches in its presbytery, the newly organized congregation, which still remembers its experiences as a mission work, understands more of what is involved in planting a new church than do most of the others. "Where might God want to use us to plant a new church?" should be on the lips and in the prayers and plans of every newly organized congregation.

MOVE FORWARD IN THE STRENGTH OF THE LORD

Newly organized congregations of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church must see themselves as having completed only the first stage of their development. They now have a greater degree of confidence that Christ, who has established and blessed them, will continue their ministry for work which they must accomplish in future years and for which they must move forward in the strength of the Lord. Now they are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom they also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22).